MIDSUMMER (SAINT JOHN'S FEAST) IN IRELAND: THE OLD AND THE NEW

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ABSTRACT

"Bonfire Night", or *Oíche Fhéile Eóin* ("Saint John's Night"), has been observed in parts of Ireland for centuries. The earliest documentary evidence of the lighting of bonfires on the eve of the feast, 23 June, dates to the 17th century. The custom was so important that it gave rise to the appellation "Bonfire Night". In the west of the country, and elsewhere, such as in Cork city, bonfire celebrations seem strong even recently. However, to survive, they must kaleidoscopically adapt to ever-changing circumstances.

Drawing on a range of sources – from the unpublished replies to National Folklore Collection (NFC) questionnaires, to twenty-first century local newspapers, and to fieldwork undertaken in 2008 – three major changes in this custom have been identified: the material allowed in the fires, the commercialisation of bonfires, and the withdrawal of a certain part of the population from the festivities.

The article will explore complementary reasons behind these trends.

Keywords: festival, adaptation, legislation, elderly, fundraising.

INTRODUCTION**

St. John's Day – also known as Midsummer[1] – falls on 24 June. Much of the emphasis is, however, placed on the previous evening, 23 June, known as "Bonfire Night" in most cases in those parts of the country where the tradition of lighting

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[1] The words "Bonfire Night" and "Saint John's Eve/Night" will be used interchangeably throughout this article, to denote the evening of 23 June, while "Saint John's Day" indicates 24 June only. The term "Midsummer", on the other hand, will be used to denote both 23 and 24 June.

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bonfires on that night was observed, including in County Kerry. (O'Hare, 2008: 26–7) In Irish, the day is most commonly called *Oíche Fhéile Eóin* or *Oíche Shain Seáin* ("Saint John's Eve/Night"), with various dialect spellings. It is known that the Feast of Saint John, and its principal attached custom, the lighting of bonfires, has been observed in Ireland at least from the 17th century, as immortalised in the writings of Sir Piers. (printed in 1786: 123)

Yet, this is not merely an Irish feast. In the past, it was celebrated throughout Europe, and even as far as Morocco and Brazil. Even nowadays, bonfires are still lighted in many places (*e.g.* in Spain; in Ireland, "West of the Shannon"[2]).

The festival in its modern manifestations appears to be a combination of pre-Christian and Christian ideas and traditions.

This article draws primarily on original research (Soverino, 2009)[3]. The focus is on the festival from the late 19th century to the early 21st century. The material discussed draws mainly on the replies to two questionnaires: "Midsummer – The Feast of St. John" (1943, clustered in the following manuscripts: NFC 956–959; 1135; 1855–1857; 1911; 2027; 2074; 2153) and "Bonfires" (1973, NFC 1855–1857; 1911; 2027; 2074; 2153); and two minor questionnaires on "Patron Saints" (1943, NFC 945–948; 1135; 1305) and "Holy Wells" (1934, NFC 466–468; 1136; 1305; 1823). All of these questionnaires were organised and circulated by the Irish Folklore Commission (IFC)[4] and successive institutions in Ireland. The article is also based on fieldwork carried out in parts of Counties Mayo and Roscommon in June 2008 (by the author), and by members of the Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin (UCD) in June 2001. Notices and articles from local journals and newspapers from the west and from other parts of Ireland have also been consulted.

The most common English name for the feast in Ireland is "(the) Bonfire Night". (Soverino, 2009: 3–10; 54–61) The terms are here telling, since bonfires are often the *sine qua non* of the festival[5]. As put by a tradition-bearer from Co. Donegal: "Just as the sun set (...) nothing was to be seen all over the district but fires". (NFC 958: 98)

The custom is still surviving in parts of Ireland, especially in the west of the country, and in other areas, such as Cork city[6].

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[2] As put by some tradition-bearers (NFC manuscript, heretofore NFC 959: 19).

[3] For references to specific pages of the NFC primary sources, see Soverino 2009.

[4] Since its inception in 1935, the Irish Folklore Commission, which became the Department of Irish Folklore in 1971, and subsequently the UCD Delargy Centre of Irish Folklore and the National Folklore Collection in 2005, focussed on collecting traditions of the people.

[5] It may be noted in passing, however, that the lighting of bonfires is by no means the only custom associated with the Feast of Saint John in Ireland.

[6] In the east of the country, bonfires were lighted on a different summer day (28 or 29 June, respectively the Eve and the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul), or on other occasions (*e.g.* on Halloween in Dublin).

In what one may perceive as a contradiction, a festival of possible Anglo-Norman origin has survived in the most "Gaelic" areas of Ireland. From an historical perspective, it can be noted that there are either no very early literary references to the lighting of Midsummer bonfires in Ireland, or that they have not yet come to light. While the absence of records for the festival in the medieval literature is normally considered a reflection of historical reality, the lack of literary references until the 17th century may call for explanations of a different kind. The maxim according to which "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence" must perhaps be borne in mind in this case. However, it seems justified to assume that the festival was introduced in Ireland, or at least strengthened, by the Anglo-Normans from the 12th century onwards. Although Saint John the Baptist was probably considered relevant in Ireland already in pre-Norman times, it is likely that his cult was intensified, and spread at a popular level, following the Anglo-Norman arrival. It is from this time onwards that statues of the saint were commissioned, and produced, in an Irish context, no doubt also encouraged by the establishment of Continental monastic orders in Ireland (MacLeod, 1946: 95–97); and several churches, both Catholic and of other denominations, were dedicated to St. John the Baptist.

EMPHASIS ON RECENT TRENDS

Festivals may be considered living links between the past, the present and the future. They go back to the past, as they were often observed by ancestors (origins); simultaneously, their survival indicates that they are relevant now (functions); finally, they are constantly changing to survive in the future.

It is thus hardly surprising that the Feast of Saint John in Ireland is also adapting to novel circumstances. This article will explore some of the principal changes in the observances and celebrations of the festival, in relation to its principal custom: the lighting of bonfires.

In the past, there were two principal kinds of bonfires usually lighted on Saint John's Eve, 23 June, namely family and communal bonfires. Family bonfires, as suggested by the name itself, were relatively small, private conflagrations, which involved the participation of the extended family, and they were usually held in the vicinity of the house or on the farm. The communal bonfires, on the other hand, saw the coming together of one or more townlands, representing major annual social occasions (Danaher, 1972: 137–138). Indeed, Saint John's Eve bonfires constituted one of the principal opportunities for the members of the local community or townland to gather together on a yearly basis. Even elderly members of the community, who might rarely be seen outdoors throughout the rest of the year, frequently joined in the celebrations associated with the St. John's Eve bonfires.

Three major trends have emerged from fieldwork conducted in June 2008, in parts of Counties Mayo and Roscommon, and from an examination of newspapers from the west and north of Ireland published in June 2001 in addition to local journals, newsletters, magazines, and of more recent YouTube videos of celebrations. These are as follows:

1. Reactions to the prohibition of burning tyres/rubber/toxic material because of legislation.

Principal source of information: fieldwork interviews conducted in June 2008[7].

2. The organisation of bonfires by businesses such as pubs and restaurants, or by local authorities; and charity fundraising events held on or around Saint John's Night (*e.g.* "Dancing at Crossroads" event, Kilmore, County Wexford).

Principal source of information: selected local newspaper notices and articles.

3. The withdrawal of the elderly from the bonfires.

Principal source of information: replies to NFC questionnaires.

FIRST TREND: REACTIONS TO THE PROHIBITION OF BURNING TYRES AND RUBBER

New regulations, aiming to protect the air quality, came into force in Ireland in 1987, with the Air Pollution Act (*http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1987/en/act/pub/0006/index.html*). The Act specifically prohibits, *inter alia*, smoke consisting of "heavy metals and their compounds" (*ibidem*). Rubber tyres, when burned, release zinc oxide, toxic dioxins and carcinogens (Sharma *et al.*, 2000: 381–382), *i.e.* heavy metals. Those substances can cause both environmental pollution, and health hazards for those exposed to them.

As clear from the quotations from the 2008 interviews provided below, all tradition-bearers, regardless of age and location, agree that tyres, rubber and other rubbish formed a substantial part of the material burnt in Midsummer bonfires in the past, but which were subsequently forbidden, by law.

> INTERVIEW 1 (CO. MAYO)
> **Tiziana**: Yeah. And, what is the attitude of the guards, or the police, the way...?
> **Tradition-bearer**: Oh, they never interfered at all, no problem, not at all. Nowadays, there would be a problem nowadays with the pollution, like, because there would be lots of tyres and rubber, and stuff like that, and you are not supposed to burn them anymore, yeah, because of… that's the law, you know. But I think they sneak a few in anyway.
> **Tiziana**: Yeah, I mean, it's just an old tradition.

[7] Recordings of the interviews are available in the NFC Audio Archive; for full-length transcripts of the interviews, see Soverino, 2009: 423–445.

Tradition-bearer: It is (?) a chance nowadays to get rid of all extra bits and pieces around the house, you know, like, everyone has more than they need, beds and mattresses and chairs, or whatever, you know, and it seems that you can't burn them in any other way, people store them up and keep them, and get rid of [them].

INTERVIEW 2 (CO. ROSCOMMON)
Tiziana: Did you put rubbish?
Tradition-bearer: Yeah, yeah, not so much rubbish, not so much rubbish, but we would get tyres, bald tyres, you wouldn't get away with that now, you know; OK, you can understand why, they are noxious fuel. And to start a fire we would get used oil – we used to call it burnt oil. The garage will keep the burnt oil, you know, when they take the oil out of the engine, you know, it's all black and sticky, and it's, you know, they are changing the oil, but they'd keep the oil for us, and we would use the used oil to start the fire. So, I mean, when you start a fire, it wasn't great to start with now, you know, you are talking about tyres, and burnt oil, and maybe turf. (Years ago).

INTERVIEW 3 (CO. MAYO)
Tradition-bearer: All the bonfires, you said... they are all gone (?...*Unclear*).
Interviewer 1: Why is that, do you think?
Tradition-bearer: They just stop from burning anyway, that's that, you shouldn't be at it.
Interviewer 2: Is it the legislation has stopped do?
Tradition-bearer: Oh, yeah, you are not allowed to burn the tyres there, like.
Interviewer 2: Oh, that's why.
Tradition-bearer: (...?) a few cardboard boxes in it. We did buy lots of tyres once, and you burnt them, not now, no, finished, finished now (...). Mostly now they would have the bonfire, like, at their backyard, where they won't be seen. They are trying to do that now, because the Guards will be out. If they saw the black smoke, they can come in here. (...)
Interviewer 2: So a whole pile of people tonight will be breaking the law then...?
Tradition-bearer: Yes, yes.
Interviewer 1: That's right.

INTERVIEW 4 (CO. MAYO)
Child 1: I might ask my dad could he put some tyres in.
Tiziana: Oh, what's the name of this... *(interruption)*?
Child 2: No, you are not allowed tyres, you are not allowed tyres.
Tiziana: But you are going to have them... no? You are not allowed anymore? I think...
Child 2: It's illegal to burn them in Ireland.

We can trace an evolution of the material put in the Midsummer bonfires in Ireland, as indicated by the questionnaire replies. Until the 1950s, it consisted primarily of the most readily-available type of local fuel and material, ***e.g.*** turf, wood, furze, heather, cow-dung.

From the 1950s, discarded rubber tyres (from bicycles and motor cars) became increasingly widespread, as clear from the replies to the 1970s questionnaire on bonfires at least until the late 1980s (Soverino, 2009: 121–132; 188–241).

In 1987, legislation prohibiting them was promulgated, as mentioned. As a consequence, people nowadays avoid putting tyres in the bonfires, or they put them in at the last minute.

The tradition-bearers from Co. Mayo and Roscommon quoted above seem to have an ambiguous attitude towards the topic. Tradition-bearers 1 and 3 seem to imply that, even though the burning of tyres was in theory forbidden, local authorities may turn a blind eye for the night, and that is the reason why some Saint John's Eve bonfires have been moved from public spaces to backyards, to try and make the black smoke less visible for the police to intervene. On the other hand, informants 2 and 4 seem more guarded: they claim that tyres are not burnt any longer, perhaps out of fear of doing or reporting something illegal.

In connection with the Midsummer bonfires as occasions to burn rubbish, a somewhat controversial article, dated to June 2001, reports that an Anti-Dump Action Committee organised a barbecue for "Bonfire Night"[8]. Now, to this writer, it looks quite contradictory that a group interested in putting an end to the illegal disposal of rubbish made use of the tradition of "Bonfire Night" to set up one of their events. Perhaps it was intentionally done, in order to show that Bonfire Night can be enjoyed even without the burning of illegal material, as no bonfire is referred to in connection with such event, the barbeque being the only form of entertainment mentioned. Alternatively, the choice of holding an Anti-Dump Action Committee barbecue on the Eve of the Feast of Saint John might have been a coincidence.

In more recent times, environmental regulations have become even stricter. The Waste Management (Prohibition of Waste Disposal by Burning) Regulation 2009, S. I. No. 286 of 2009, imposes a fine of up to 3,000 euro to those who breach it by burning waste, and also urges people to report neighbours or other individuals whom they may catch *in flagrante delicto* (*http://www.epa.ie/waste/householder/burn/#.VjS-bWvakQI*).

It remains to be established whether this more recent law is regularly implemented.

[8] See the *Connacht Tribune*, 22 June 2001, 8: "Anti-dump grouping hold big night out". Newbridge Anti-Dump Action Committee are holding a fundraising barbecue on Bonfire Night (Saturday, June 23) with music by Mike and John. A great night is promised and all support would be appreciated (...)".

SECOND TREND: THE ORGANISATION OF BONFIRES BY BUSINESSES; CHARITY FUNDRAISING EVENTS

The commercial developments of Saint John's Feast celebrations in Ireland, and the organisation of a variety of fundraising events at the time of the festival, represent another trend. This trend, which has developed in the last twenty years, has emerged from an examination of local journals, newspapers, parish newsletters and, to a lesser extent, from NFC manuscripts themselves. The fieldwork carried out by members of the UCD Department of Irish Folklore in June 2001, and the fieldwork undertaken by the present writer in parts of Counties Roscommon and Mayo in June 2008, have shown that, in a number of instances, Saint John's Eve bonfires are still a spontaneous event, undertaken by and for the young members of local communities, and occasionally for the whole community. This, however, does not always hold true. In some places, the celebrations of Saint John's Feast have moved away from the form they had in the past, assuming commercial and charity connotations. What is now being witnessed is perhaps an example of the "Second Life" of folklore, when folklore material is used "in an environment that differs from its original cultural context". (Honko, 1991: 43) The First Life of folklore, on the other hand, is "the natural, almost imperceptible existence of folklore in the folklore community (…), neither noticed, recognised, or emphasised" (*ibidem*). "The Second Life" of folklore may be detected in the observances of the Midsummer festival in other countries. For instance, in Turin, the practice of lighting the Saint John's Eve bonfires was abandoned in the 1850s, and was then reintroduced into the cultural scene of that city from 1971 onwards. (Flamini cited in Bonino, 2007: 3–8) To return to Ireland, the dates of some of the bonfires and associated celebrations organized by public houses and restaurants, as well as of fundraising events, are usually moveable, being held on the Friday or Saturday closer to the 24 June.

The commercial potential of folklore and of calendar events in particular, is substantial. This is shown, for example, by the sale of religious objects, such as rosaries, at the "pattern"[9]. The sale of fancy dresses and ready-made decorations for Halloween in Ireland, and for Carnival in Continental Europe, are examples showing the level of commercialization which can be attached to festivals. It does not come as a surprise, then, that the custom of lighting Midsummer bonfires, along with the more recent open-air barbecues to accompany them, is also being commercialized, in at least parts of the west of Ireland. An analysis of newspapers from that area of the country for June 2001 has indicated that many public houses and restaurants offer a ready-made bonfire and/or barbecue on the grounds of their premises. These events are often accompanied by a band playing live music.

[9] From the Irish *patrún*, it indicates a religious pilgrimage, which was usually associated with a patron saint and was often held on an annual basis (Ó Giolláin, 2005: 11).

An example is found in the *Roscommon Herald* dated to 20 June 2001, where, as part of the "Entertainment" section, was written:

> The Corskeagh Lounge and Restaurant (Farrell's) – Frenchpark. Saturday, June 23: Bonfire and Barbecue with Open Air Session (weather permitting), fancy dress parade at 9 o'clock.
>
> (Roscommon Herald, 20 June 2001: 31)

This appears to be a fairly recent development, perhaps paralleling the shift of the Irish *céilí*, or informal social gatherings of neighbours and friends, from private fireplaces, to public-house settings (Brennan, 1999: 136). Likewise, the dances, which were held at crossroads and other outdoor locations up to the 1930s, moved to the dance halls under the Dance Hall Act of 1935 (*ibidem*, 125–126), later shifting to other venues such as clubs. Numerous informants, when talking about Saint John's Feast, also stated that the prohibition on holding outdoor dances had a bearing on the survival of the customs associated with Saint John's Feast. For instance, one informant from the Ballintober area of County Roscommon remarked, in the late 1970s, that:

> The Dance Halls first injured the bonfire, for they one and all held a Bonfire Night Dance for just a few pence. At the start of this, all the young folk went, now it's the singing pub. What a pity – the beautiful wide tarred roads now for dancing – but then it would mean a car or lorry a minute; what a change from the bicycles along the roadside.
>
> (NFC 1911: 23)

It may be argued that the organisation of some Midsummer bonfires by pubs and restaurants is not merely an exploitation of an ancient festival for profit, but perhaps also a form of adaptation to modern lifestyles. Firstly, many people nowadays are accustomed to ready-made living, so to speak, as shown, for example, by the vast array of ready-made meals available in supermarkets. Consequently, a good number of people who would like to attend a Midsummer bonfire are simply too busy, or lazy to contribute to the gathering of the material necessary for it. Furthermore, an element of profit associated with Saint John's Feast was already present in former times, for a few tradition-bearers remarked that drinks were sold in the vicinity of the Midsummer bonfires (for example NFC 957: 118, Kilcommon area, County Mayo), or that people, at the end of the bonfire celebrations, would stop in the local pub for drinks. (NFC 957: 198, Kiltoghert area, County Leitrim) Not only that, but stalls selling drink, foodstuffs and other objects were also present in the case of religious patterns[10], in Ireland and elsewhere, showing that not even in the past there was a real dichotomy between sacred and profane, genuine and commercial.

[10] As already indicated.

It may thus be claimed that the organising of the Midsummer bonfires by pubs and restaurants, while representing a modern development of the celebrations, and possibly belonging to the "Second Life" of folklore, has stemmed from the time-honoured tradition of buying drinks at the local pub when coming home from the Saint John's Eve bonfires. Perhaps it is also of some significance that, at least by the 1970s, some of the places where Midsummer bonfires were lighted were conveniently "close to the pubs", possibly because such hostelries were local meeting points, and it would have been easier for the people to celebrate in the local public house after the bonfires had been lighted. (for example NFC 1856: 42, Lackagh area, County Galway) Only one more step was needed to have the pubs themselves organise the whole Saint John's Eve celebrations, something which eventually happened in some cases.

Undoubtedly, in some cases, the pubs and restaurants have taken charge of the whole Midsummer festivities, which were formerly organised and carried out by individuals and community groups without money-making goals. This fact should be evaluated against the backdrop of the pub taking the place of informal social gatherings in private houses and at crossroads, a phenomenon that gained more and more momentum from the second half of the twentieth century in Ireland. Additionally, as mentioned, the acceptance of ready-made and passive entertainment, partly caused by a more hectic and busy lifestyle, may also have contributed. Obviously, there is also a profit element involved, for, at times at least, the people attending the bonfires-cum-barbecue and the live music organised by pubs and restaurants, pay a fee to take part in the event. Even when there is no cover charge, the bonfire draws customers to the premises, and thus leads to an increase in sales and revenue. But one is reminded of the old custom, current in certain places of Ireland, according to which everyone attending the bonfire had to contribute his or her share of fuel, or of the custom of "giving a penny for the bonfire", something that was often requested by groups of youths carrying out a door-to-door collection for bonfire purposes. (Soverino, 2009: 130–132; 230–241) Perhaps, then, considering the enormous changes that have occurred in Irish society in the last fifty or sixty years, the fee that sometimes people pay to attend the bonfires in pubs represents the modern counterpart of those old customs of "giving something" for the bonfire. It remains to be established if the custom of having the Midsummer bonfires prepared by commercial enterprises will ultimately survive, as it appears to be a fairly recent development, yet in embryo.

A second relatively recent development of the celebrations of Midsummer in Ireland consists of Saint John's Eve and surrounding days and evenings being used to hold fundraising events. It may be noted that there are thousands of fundraising events organised in Ireland every year, which unite the generosity of the Irish with their love of entertainment. The exploitation of the feast of Saint John with its bonfire for charity and philanthropic purposes falls into this category. Once again, an analysis of a sample of local journals, magazines, parish newsletters and

newspapers, from late-twentieth century and early twenty-first century Ireland, shows that in various parts of the island, from County Mayo in the west to County Wexford in the east, Saint John's Feast has been exploited as a premium time for holding fundraising events. Concerning this, it should be emphasised that, in some cases, the clustering of outdoor charity events around the 21/24 June might have to do with the fact that the weather is more likely to be clement during this period of the year than at other times. On the other hand, a number of charity events scheduled around Midsummer appear to represent a conscious attempt, on the part of the organisers, to take repossession of ancient customs. Those customs are often deemed as part of the heritage and identity of Ireland, and they are said to have been forgotten, or no longer practised, as clear, for instance, from comments about the "Dancing at the Crossroads" event. Many charity events held on or around Saint John's Eve include the lighting of bonfires, or the organisation of a barbecue – similarly to the regular, non-fundraising events organised by venues, as noted. Other events, such as the kindling of candles to be brought in procession to a mountain top[11], may also derive from the custom of lighting Midsummer bonfires on such heights. (Soverino, 2009: 102–105)

Perhaps one of the most telling fundraising happenings, openly recalling old customs which were specifically, although not exclusively, associated with Saint John's Feast, is "Dancing at the Crossroads" event. (Dillon, 2005–2006: 82–84) Based in Ballycogley, County Wexford, this successful event was hosted for three consecutive years from 2002 (*ibidem*). Organised by local people and clergy, (*ibidem*, 83) its aim is to restore the old and often half-forgotten custom of dancing at the crossroads, which formed part and parcel of life in rural Ireland. Although practised on many other occasions throughout the year also, as mentioned, dancing formed part of the Midsummer celebrations in Ireland. This is undoubtedly shown by the many informants who replied to the 1943 and 1973 questionnaires about Saint John's Feast and about bonfires, as indicated by an examination of the relevant NFC manuscripts. (Soverino, 2009: 144–147; 299) The organisers of the fundraising event "Dancing at the Crossroads" seem to have been well aware of this, so much so that they decided to hold the event around the 22 and 23 June each summer. At the same time, the exceptional number of people attending "Dancing at the Crossroads" (more than one thousand people assembled there in 2003, for instance) meant that a substantial amount of money was also collected, furnishing much-needed funds for charities such as Hospice Homecare, Concern, Special Olympics, and the cancer treatment unit at Wexford General Hospital. (Dillon, 2005–6: 82–84) Apart from Irish dancing, the charity event comprised many other

[11] From the *Leitrim Observer*, 20 June 2001, 8 (Keadue/Arigna/Ballyfarnon community news): "BONFIRE NIGHT. The now annual lighting of the "Midsummer Candle" at the Mount on the 6 000-year-old collapsed chamber grave on top of Kilronan Mountain will take place at midnight on Saturday night, weather permitting. All who wish to walk up to light the "fire" should meet at the Presbytery at 11.00. The walk is an easy one but different. Anyone who wishes may come along".

disparate activities and performances, such as live music, singing, comedy, clowns, mummers, a barbecue and fireworks (*ibidem*).

As noted, the celebration of Saint John's Feast, especially in its more modern and commercialized forms, or for charity, has in some cases shifted to the weekends. This is possibly because those are the times when people are more prone to celebrate. Taking place in the late evening, Midsummer parties are likely to continue until very late at night; if held during the week, this may cause problems for people who have to get up early the following morning. Those problems are mitigated if the celebrations are held on a Friday or Saturday night. It may also be noted that different parts of the population are likely to be targeted by the Midsummer bonfires organised by public houses, and by those prepared by families or communities. The earlier are probably addressed primarily to an audience of unmarried people, since there is a ban on admitting young people to pubs after a certain time at night. The latter, on the other hand, seem to be attended primarily by children and youths.

It appears that a moveable date for the lighting of Midsummer bonfires does not generally apply to those bonfires that are more spontaneously prepared by local communities, most of which are held on 23 June, Saint John's Eve, each year. This, at least, is what emerged from the fieldwork carried out in June 2008; and this point was corroborated by an investigation of recently-collected material. However, it should also be noted that these more spontaneous bonfires are primarily prepared by and for children, teenagers and their parents, and that most of the older children and teenagers do not have to attend school at this time of the year, since pupils of secondary school age are already on holidays by 23 June. Finally, it is also possible that the shifting of these Midsummer celebrations organised by pubs and other commercial venues to the weekend nearest to Saint John's Day, ultimately betrays a secularization of Irish society, although, even in the first half of the twentieth-century, some informants did not consider Saint John's Day a religious festival.

Perhaps some folklorists belonging to the old school of thought would be quick to dismiss these new developments of Saint John's Feast, such as the bonfire and the barbecue prepared by public houses and restaurants, and the fundraising events associated with it, as unworthy of study, regarding them as spurious (re)-inventions of tradition. However, the present writer is of the opinion that folk customs and beliefs are worthy of investigation, even when they are relatively new, or re-invented. Folklore does not live exclusively in the past; it is also part and parcel of the present, and this is exactly what makes the academic discipline of folklore challenging and thriving. It is argued here that any given custom or tradition will, at one stage or another, have to change in order to adapt to new social and cultural milieus, while customs failing to do so will often be abandoned. Since life in Ireland, as in the rest of Western Europe, has changed enormously in the course of the last one hundred and fifty years and even more so from the 1950s,

it is only to be expected that the customs surrounding Saint John's Feast are also changing. The fact that pubs and restaurants have sometimes begun to take charge of those celebrations, and the organisation of fundraising events around Midsummer, represents new trends in the festival. It is possible that, in the future, events such as those described above will increase, and maybe even replace the more spontaneous bonfires organised by local communities and children. It was also noted above that the bonfires organized by public houses and the bonfires organised by communities seem to be addressed to different kinds of audiences: the earlier target mainly adults, the latter target mainly children and their parents. Already in the 1970s, one tradition-bearer, from the Ahamlish area of County Sligo, recognised that on Saint John's Eve, while children lit bonfires, adults preferred to go to the public house:

> All people in the locality went to the bonfire. Nowadays only the children go, most of the older people now go to the public houses for the social activities.
>
> (NFC 1856: 135)

Considering this, it is thus possible that both kinds of Midsummer bonfires will continue to survive side by side.

An analysis of the newspapers from June 2001 shows that both family and communal bonfires were still lit, depending on the areas and on local circumstances. Moreover, it is also apparent that new, "untraditional" activities, such as children's face painting, adult golf, and so on, were being carried out around, or in connection with, the bonfires. In some cases, a fancy dress parade was also mentioned. (Roscommon Herald, 20 June 2001: 31)

The most common attitude shown by journalists in local newspaper articles examined by this writer on the subject of St. John's Eve bonfires is to view them as a harmless, time-honoured amusement to be cherished, although they noted that there might also be problems associated with them, at times. The following article, taken from the *Ulster Herald*, is a typical example of that attitude:

> For many, the tradition of bonfire night has died out because of other such attractions such as televisions and computers but not in one home in Trillick. The McCaughey family of Badoney have kept this age-old June practice alive over the years, and this year was no exception. On Saturday evening last, the night sky glowed over the family home as one of the biggest bonfires seen in the district raged, fuelled with old tyres, old logs and anything else that was considered obsolete. Friends and neighbours gathered to see the inferno, to renew acquaintance and to talk about the events of the day. However not everything does always go according to plan. Patsy recalls that last year's fire took place in a field near the home. This year his brother Vincent went to cut the grass on that same particular field, but after a few swathes he noticed the mower wasn't cutting as freely as usual. On examination he noticed fine wire jammed in the machinery – yes, you have guessed it – the wire from the tyres

> was playing havoc and caused more than a few headaches. Patsy made sure the same thing didn't happen this year.
>
> (Ulster Herald, 28 June 2001: 19)

Moving forward in time, the attitude of journalists towards "Bonfire Night" was still largely unchanged in June 2008, as shown by the following piece, reported in the *Roscommon Herald*:

> LOCAL NOTES – BOYLE. "BONFIRES":
>
> There weren't too many bonfires again this year on the traditional "bonfire night" which was last night (23 June), although some smoke was visible early in the evening. Bonfire night is another tradition that is dying out all over Ireland, which is a shame really as kids never will know the *craic* and rivalry, and weeks of planning that went in to the storing of tyres at secret locations and waiting for the surprise raid from a neighbouring "gang". Bonfire night was awaited with excitement for months by the youths of Boyle, and if you were lucky enough to know an obliging adult with a trailer, then a trip to JT Emmet's in Ballyfarnon was requested to see could the much sought after tractor tyres[12] be obtained – alas all no more and all stories that will go down in history, although it is reported that one or two youth-groups had their own bonfires for their members.
>
> (Roscommon Herald, 24 June 2008: 26)

What is most striking about the above article is the great sense of nostalgia for a past tradition that is dying out, or, at least, that is felt to be on the wane, by the journalist. It is possible that Midsummer bonfires are "always going and never gone", since even in the early twentieth century there was talk of the custom disappearing (Soverino, 2009: 195–196; 212–219), whereas it is still vibrant in parts of Ireland, *e.g.* parts of Counties Mayo, Roscommon and Donegal. Obviously, however, many changes have been introduced in the celebrations. Possibly the author of the *Roscommon Herald* article quoted above was alluding to this, although transformations in the St. John's Feast celebrations were already well under way in the 1970s, as shown by the replies to the bonfire questionnaire. It must also be emphasised that the days immediately preceding the 23 June 2008 were extremely wet and windy in many areas of Ireland, something that might have determined the somewhat sparser lighting of Midsummer bonfires in that particular year. Sometimes tradition-bearers fail to recognize a custom they have engaged in is still observed if it has changed substantially in the meantime. But in today's fast-changing world, as already mentioned, it is vital for folk customs and traditions to adapt in order to survive.

[12] We may note, in passing, that tyres are fondly remembered as an integral part of the Midsummer celebrations by this journalist of the *Roscommon Herald*, who does not mention environmental pollution or health hazards.

By and large, then, the newspaper accounts have shown that, besides the various modernizations, the celebrations of St. John's Eve are still alive, although at times the very people who perpetuate them are not aware of the full significance the lighting of the bonfires had for their own ancestors. But the big bonfires are still blazing, and maybe this is all that matters.

THIRD TREND: WITHDRAWAL OF THE ELDERLY

The principal and most significant shift in the celebrations of the Midsummer bonfires in Ireland, commencing around the middle of the twentieth century, consisted of the withdrawal of the older people from the bonfires. This was evident from an investigation of the replies to the 1943 questionnaire on Midsummer, and it emerged even more clearly from the replies to the 1973 questionnaire on bonfires. (Soverino, 2009: 195–199) By the latter period, Saint John's Eve bonfires were mostly lit by groups of children and/or youths, especially teenagers, who were occasionally accompanied by their parents as a form of supervision. Numerous informants explicitly stated that adults and older people did not join the crowd gathered around the bonfire anymore. This was perceived as something to be regretted, and described with nostalgia and a sense of disappointment. (for example NFC 1856: 14, Moylough area, County Galway) By contrast, as is apparent from the replies to the 1943 questionnaire, in the late nineteenth century, and often into the first half of the twentieth, essentially the whole community had gathered around the Midsummer bonfires and, although the older people often left earlier than the young (Soverino, 2009; 305; NFC 957: 85; NFC 1856: 28–30), it was they who were responsible for carrying out the most overtly ceremonial aspects of the celebrations. It was very common for the bonfire to be lit by the oldest member of the community present (Soverino, 2009: 195; 242–243; O'Hare, 2008: 36)[13]. Furthermore, prayers said around the bonfire, such as the Rosary, were mostly led by older people. (Soverino, 2009: 195–196; 418–422) Even more importantly, the crop-and cattle-protection rites associated with Saint John's Eve bonfires were undertaken by the elderly, in some cases, at least. (*ibidem*, 195–196; 380–381)

There is undoubtedly a close link between the non-participation of the oldest community members in the bonfire celebrations and the wane of prayers and crop- and cattle-protection rites at Midsummer in Ireland – as prayers and apotropaic rites ebbed significantly from the second half of the twentieth century, when many elderly stopped attending the bonfires. The exact relationship between the withdrawal of the older people, and the wane of prayers and protective rites, however, remains to be determined. Although there are some exceptions to this

[13] O'Hare is here specifically referring to Midsummer bonfires in County Kerry, as opposed to in other parts of Ireland.

situation, many tradition-bearers, when answering the 1943 and the 1973 questionnaires, remarked that the Midsummer bonfires were losing, or had lost, most of their ceremonial aspects, as they were by then lit just by children or youths and solely for the purpose of having fun. For example, an informant, from the Ballindoon area of County Galway, reported in 1943:

> The practice of lighting bonfires is still practised here, but the custom is shorn of all its old time significance. It is now just to amuse and perhaps offer a meeting place for youngsters. The jumping through the smoke and throwing a live coal into the field has ceased. The people have no idea of the origin of the custom, but they have ceased to associate it with St. John and some have come by the information that it is of pagan origin and has something to do with the fire worshipping of pre-Christian Ireland.
>
> (NFC 957: 60)

While the withdrawal of the elderly from Midsummer celebrations was a very widespread phenomenon from the 1970s onwards, in at least some parts of Ireland – as indicated by the replies to the bonfire questionnaire from that decade – that trend was well under way even at an earlier stage. For instance, a tradition-bearer from west County Limerick commented in the 1930s:

> Old people now living do not remember these things (...) I know Athea for the past forty years and the only fires of this kind I saw here were those made by young people in a dozen different places. (...) The interest of the elders in the festival had clearly died out (emphasis by the author; Danaher, 1972: 135)

The loss of interest in Midsummer bonfires by the older people should be considered against the wider background of the changing nature of society and lifestyles in the last century or so. While a detailed examination and discussion of those social changes cannot be undertaken here, a few possible reasons for the withdrawal of the elderly from the bonfires will be suggested. These can be said to fall under three main headings: social, economic and educational. It must be pointed out that such reasons are not to be considered mutually exclusive, for they could, and probably have, appeared side by side.

The principal social change which might have affected the participation of older people consists of the shift from extended family to nuclear family situations. (Kennedy, 2001: 46–47) By no means exclusive to Ireland, this is a wider phenomenon. In traditional Ireland, grandparents and other elderly relatives usually lived with their children and grandchildren. Thus, for example, certain types of vernacular dwellings contained a bed outshot, that was the sleeping space occupied by grandparents. But from the 1950s onwards, more families tended to be nuclear, that is to say, made up of parents and children only, while the elderly more frequently live alone, or took up residence in homes for the elderly (*ibidem)*. As a

consequence, elderly people have not been participating in the life and activities of their relatives or of their community as much as previously. Furthermore, nowadays the widespread use of motor cars, which are not accessible to many older individuals, has contributed to the marginalization of the elderly in some cases, especially in rural areas, where public transport is poor or non-existent. (Treacy *et al*., 2004: 183)

Among the economic factors is the tendency, over the last fifty years or so, to move away from farming and husbandry. In particular since the 1990s, the great success of the tertiary sector in Ireland and the growth of urban areas have played a major role in the economy of the country. (Clinch *et al.*, 2002: 24–42; Walsh, 2007: 146) Since there was a deep and close connection between the lighting of the Saint John's Eve bonfires in the countryside and the protection of crops and cattle, the fact that many people nowadays have no crops under cultivation, and own no cattle, possibly has had a bearing on the nature of the celebrations themselves, which have become more and more associated with youths, children and fun, and less with protective rites.

Finally, the increase in the levels of formal education, and the abandonment of traditional lifestyles and world-views could also have contributed to the disinterest of the elderly in Midsummer bonfires. A tendency to rationalise and consider only scientific explanations and proceedings as legitimate means that, for the average person, chemical fertilizers are now deemed much more effective than the ashes from the Midsummer bonfires. So, in reality, there was no longer any need for the older people, who tended to perform crop protection rites, to join the bonfire celebrations. Such an attitude was expressed by a tradition-bearer, referring to the use of the ashes on cattle:

> My father R.I.P. used to say that it was the way they had for killing the fleas on the cattle before DDT [talking about cattle protection rites].
>
> (NFC 2153: 153)

Although probably said with humour, this statement may well reflect the world-view of some tradition-bearers. In many places in Ireland cattle were driven through the May Day and/or Midsummer bonfires to rescue or preserve them from disease and supernatural evil influences. The two matters – ailments and supernatural hostile powers – were inextricably correlated in the world-view of the Irish people who lived in rural areas in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

A widespread change in the world-view and way of life of many Irish people is also confirmed by the fact that, with a couple of exceptions, supernatural legends associated with the bonfires were no longer reported in the answers to the 1973 questionnaire about bonfires. This situation stands in sharp contrast to that pertaining in the replies to the 1943 questionnaire on the Feast of Saint John, which included some supernatural legends. (Soverino, 2009: 236–256)[14]

[14] An article on the topic is currently being prepared by this writer.

SAINT JOHN'S FEAST IN IRELAND: IN A STATE OF FLUX

Many Midsummer bonfires in Ireland are now lighted just for and by children and youngsters. Should this be considered a degradation of the custom, or merely a change, having no bearing on the vitality of the observance itself?

Even in the 1940s, tradition-bearers lamented that the tradition was in decline, although martial conflicts may have played a part. Fifteen tradition-bearers remarked that the custom of lighting Midsummer bonfires suffered a serious blow because of wars. (*e.g.* NFC 957: 167) The first half of the twentieth century saw the First World War, (1914–1918) the Irish Civil War (1920s) and the Second World War. (1939–1945)[15] During those periods, it was considered dangerous for people to congregate at night in outdoor locations, for two main reasons: because, during the Civil War, the British Authorities considered all outdoor meetings a potential threat to the British occupation of Ireland, and because of the blackout. With regard to the latter, people were not allowed to light bonfires in the evenings. It is very possible that wars thus played a significant role in determining the abandonment of the lighting of the St. John's Eve bonfires, at least in those areas where the tradition was not strong enough to continue after being interrupted for a few years.

As a consequence of the deep-seated and powerful changes which have taken place in the western world in the last century, and increasingly from the 1920s, the way in which folklore is interpreted, lived and studied has shifted. Among the many transformations there was the development of a society in which mass-produced goods, and a popular culture often encouraged and dictated by the mass media, came to the fore. In our society, globalization is a strong reality: a wide range of ideas, material goods and ways of life are thus now found side by side in the same surroundings. While, on the one hand, this means that different cultural values and ideas are more easily accessible to many people, it also means, on the other hand, that globalization could cause the loss of local identity and traditions. Those could be replaced by a more generalised, often commercially or profit-driven cheap version of various local concepts, and by objects from around the world, available in cities and small towns alike. (Ó Giolláin, 2000: 171–84) In contrast, however, as a reaction to the relative flattening of cultures posed as a threat by globalization, a tendency to re-appropriate one's own local "heritage", and "authentic traditions", has also come to the fore, as shown by the development of the "slow-food" movement all across Europe and the USA, whose aim is to (re)establish foodstuffs and drinks typical of the local area, and often coming from an old tradition, which is also, by the way, often seen as a tourism opportunity.

That same trend occurred at many levels, so that, for instance, as emphasised by Ó Giolláin, pilgrimages to holy wells closely linked to local saints have often

[15] Although Ireland remained neutral during the Second World War, whose period was known as "The Emergency", the war obviously affected Ireland too.

been replaced by more universal-type pilgrimages, dedicated to international saints or to the Virgin Mary. (1991: 211–212)

The role of Saint John's Feast in relation to all of this is exceptional. Although associated with a foreign saint, and probably introduced into Ireland by the Anglo-Normans[16], the feast managed to survive quite strongly in part of Ireland, including the west.

It has thus often, quite paradoxically, been equated with Irish, Celtic and Gaelic identity, as opposed to English identity.

There have been attempts to localize the festival of Saint John. As Saint John the Baptist was a foreign saint, of a by-gone area, he needed to be linked to the world of the tradition-bearers, to better mediate between the people and God, and be more relevant. Therefore, for instance, some informants claimed that Saint John had once visited Ireland, or that the 24 June was not the festival of Saint John the Baptist, but of a local saint bearing the same first name:

> In this locality the festival became associated with *Naomh Eoin* (St. John), a local saint whose habitation was *Teach Eoin*, St. John's Point.
>
> (NFC 1857: 122)

Alongside that, in recent times, the influence of globalization has also been felt on the lighting of the bonfires. For example, one tradition-bearer, from the Killorglin area of County Kerry, argued that, whereas in the past the main bonfire of the year was lit on Saint John's Eve, in the last few years that bonfire has been on the wane, while a bigger one is now lit for Halloween, possibly because of influence from Dublin. (NFC 2153: 119–120)[17] The first aforementioned change, in the material burnt in the Midsummer bonfires, ultimately comes from outside, in reaction to the fact that it is now prohibited by law to burn tyres in bonfires. Other facets of modernization intruding into Midsummer celebrations in Ireland include the organization of bonfires and other celebrations by public houses and restaurants with a commercial undertone, and the holding of fundraising events linked to Saint John's Feast. Undoubtedly, increased secularism, and the shift from an agrarian economy, have contributed to transform Midsummer celebrations in Ireland.

Yet, as mentioned above, a manifestation of the "counter-globalization" movement, so to speak, is represented by the willingness of people, emerging in many different parts of Ireland where the Midsummer bonfires had not been lit for many years, to get repossession of their cultural heritage, by lighting those bonfires again. This may said to correspond to the "Second Life" of folklore, and it usually means that bonfires are now organized by pubs, local county council authorities, or other societies. It is also exemplified by the above-mentioned charity event

[16] See p. 3 of this article.

[17] This comment refers to the custom, still observed in parts of Dublin city and county to light bonfires on Halloween, 31 October, rather than on Saint John's Eve.

"Dancing at the Crossroads" of County Wexford, where traditions from the past are re-invented in new settings and for a novel purpose. That event, besides attracting commercial tourism, could also be read as an attempt, by participants, to regain possession of their past identity and traditions. From the foregoing discussion it has emerged that the festival of Saint John is a vibrant calendar occasion, which is adapting to changing social, economic and cultural circumstances. Tyres may be avoided or sneaked in the bonfires; older people do not take part in the bonfires as widely as they used to in the past. Still, even in a sophisticated and super-technological era such as our own, Midsummer bonfires retain their appeal. As put by McKean, "No traditional practice is static; indeed, though change is often not volitional, customs evolve in order to retain vitality and relevance, usually in a fairly conservative way, but they alter nevertheless". (2012: 27)

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